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Jason Michael Macleod
Iowa State University

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Morning

story by | JASON MICHAEL MACLEOD

In the darkness, with my finger, I draw a simple dragon on her bare back. We should sleep, but do not. “It will be here?” I ask, slowly repeating the pattern.

“The other shoulder,” she answers. Though it is after midnight, lampposts hazing yellow off the streets of Boston, her speech is not yet muddled and American-sounding as when she is tired. At the beginning of last year when she came to study in the states, I told her she had a beautiful accent, but she had just laughed, saying Newcastle was considered common in Britain.

I slide closer to her in the rigid hotel bed. “And it will be a dragon?” I ask.

“Yes, it will be a dragon.”

Pulling the sheets to her chin, she

slides away. I feel a cold draft and imagine, briefly, that the tattoo gun will be cold — sterile, each prick a pin of ice.

“And why will it be a dragon?”

She says nothing for a moment. We hear the labored chugs of the ice machine kicking on down the hall. “Last spring, Amanda and I went on our third holiday in Amsterdam. Silly, really — to keep going back to the same place with so many other cities on the continent. It was a best friends thing; we claimed the city as ours.” Her head turns slightly; she’s looking out the window now.

“For most of one afternoon we poked around a little shop that sold Oriental dragons. Large brass. Small ceramic. Dragons etched onto rings. Locketts. She nicked a thumb-sized jade one for me to

keep on the way out. It was smiling. I remember her saying that dragons in Asia were guardians, protectors.”

“I didn’t know that,” I say. What I don’t say is, I just felt you move away again. She’d been moving away for three weeks. Since that phone call came at 1 p.m. London time, just after our breakfast, the morning she made me try that disgusting salty Marmite on my toast, the last time she laughed.

“We should sleep,” she yawns, her voice flattening, sounding Midwestern. “I have to be at Logan at quarter to seven for my flight.”

“Maybe we should,” I say.

I trace another dragon on her shoulder, a smiling one. It feels wrong. “And you have everything?” I ask.



"Yes, I have everything."

"What about the white-water rafting picture of us, do you have that?" I ask, thinking of my own blurred copy of the photo. The rafting company cameraman said he should have used a different lens. I bought it anyway; I liked the way she and I seemed to morph together in the heat of the afternoon.

"It's in my pack," she said.

"And your passport?"

"I have everything."

I am still touching her. My hand rubs the small of her back for what feels like a long time.

Wind against the window. A truck growls by. I dream. We are in our English seminar, but everything recedes. The walls fade; the landscape dims. We are walking backwards from the sun.

A muffled laughter wakes me. A couple is entering their room down the hall from us after a late night. Our air conditioner struggles against the autumn heat as I twist under the sheets. It will be

dawn soon, but I see she has not fallen asleep. So we lie awake, silent.

Finally I ask, "It was in Spain?"

I am close and can hear her breathe.

"Madrid." Her words slur now, a southern drawl, her exhaustion complete. "The balcony Amanda was dancing on gave way."

In the dark I wish the world was a blurred photo — everyone frozen in motion, a bright moment endless.

"And when you arrive home, before you head back to University, you will go to the grave?"

"Yes," she answers, a whisper.

The first sliver of sun enters the room. I see her smooth back rising and falling, finally almost asleep.

"And you will say goodbye?" I ask, then am ashamed by my prying.

But she is still. Her breath a slow rhythm. I move my hand from her back — from the grinning dragon already there, protecting her, fiercely, from the simple light of the morning. e

I liked the way she and I seemed to morph together in the heat of the afternoon.